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‘The magazine that isn’t’: The future of features online

Abstract:

This essay considers how feature writing, with its attractive layout and graphics, and its attention to the stylistic and narrative pleasures of the text, has made the transition from print magazines to online magazine websites, thriving in both written and multimedia forms. Adopting Steensen’s definition of features as a ‘a family of genres that address a similar exigence but differ in rhetorical form’ (2010: 133), I consider the transformations and resilience of features online, together with the different sites that have developed for their publication, including print news and magazine websites, specific online magazines exclusively commissioning features, feature aggregator sites, and the more recently produced feature disaggregator sites. Looking at some examples of features online, the essay considers whether the accessibility and adaptability of the form may enhance its status as both journalism and writing. The article ends by asking if the integration of the core, factual narrative text, with documentary audio, video, slide shows and linking material, might constitute a kind of ‘aesthetic journalism’ (Cramerotti 2009).

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A narrative presenting a portrait of a contingent world inherently resists critical closure (John Hartsock 2000: 247).

What is a feature and does it matter?

Feature articles have been a literary and journalistic mainstay of commercial magazines since their inception in the late 17th century, yet they have received surprisingly little scholarly attention as a genre. Although there is no shortage of textbooks on news writing and print journalism that include a chapter on the feature, and describe the reporting techniques and writing craft it calls for, few of these refer at any length to the nature or history of the form and its socio-political significance within the media landscape. The default setting for discussion of media writing is the pyramid structured news report; and the overarching function of journalism is assumed to most securely reside within this more strictly neutral and informational genre. Aligned to the institutional voice of the publication, news is upheld as journalism's gold standard of objectivity, acting as witness, watchdog and pillar of the fourth estate.

In contrast, the feature is commonly regarded as a supplementary form of news. Sometimes it is regarded as 'slightly suspect' (Mencher 2006: 166), reserved for slow news days, and taking lifestyle and personal topics as its subject. At other times it's regarded as a higher, creative and more challenging form of news (Franklin 1996; McKay 2000; Stein *et al* 2006) since it requires the skills of the reporter, plus those of the wordsmith and the avid researcher. Yet it is in each case the secondary news genre, defined according to what news is not before considering inherent criteria (Ricketson 2004; Harcup 2005).

Part of the dilemma for features may be similar to that described by the historian of literary journalism John Hartsock, who argues that there has been a 'critical void' in this area due to literary journalism being on the one hand literary but non-fictional, hence not literary enough to capture the respect of literary critics; and on the other hand journalistic, but not 'hard' news reporting, hence not the highest kind of journalism (1999: 432).

The variety of features is part of their appeal, but perhaps adds to the challenge of definition. As Jane Taylor writes, the feature is 'that most fluid of journalistic forms' (2005: 126); and its types are routinely, though variously listed as news feature, backgrounder, colour story, human interest story, profile, interview, travel, opinion and essay, among others (see for example, McKay 2000; Ricketson 2004; Taylor 2005; Eisenuth & McDonald 2007; Tanner *et al* 2008). A convincing typology is yet to be developed, and is perhaps too difficult given the rapidly changing technological environment in which features are now being published.

The most useful definition is Steensen's, who writes that:

feature journalism is a family of genres that traditionally have been dominated by three discourses: a literary discourse and discourses of intimacy and adventure. The social function of feature journalism – which has been surprisingly stable during the last hundred years – has therefore primarily been to entertain the audience and connect

people on an emotional level through the exposure of personal experiences of perceived public value (2010: 145).

Steensen not only accounts for the diversity, adaptability and newsworthiness of features, he also acknowledges their literary origins. As James Carey has pointed out, 'Journalism was traditionally conceived as a literary genre rather than as a species of technical writing' (1969: 137), so it seems odd that news writing has distanced itself from the more overtly narrative forms; and this has been documented by Schudson and others as part of its history of professionalization in the late 19th and early 20th century when editors recommended that 'imaginative writing; if used at all, be confined to non-essentials' (1978: 79). Steensen suggests the need for genre studies and he proposes that journalism scholarship move on from its dependence on the hard/soft division in its organization of news writing (2011a; 2010) in order to adequately understand the importance of the feature.

The first use in journalism of the term feature has been traced to 1855, the same year the *Daily telegraph and courier* was launched in London. And Hartsock notes that the 'human interest story' (though not the feature) was a term promoted by Charles Dana, the editor of the *New York tribune*, in the mid 19th century (2000: 127). According to Steensen, one of its earliest definitions was by HF Harrington in his 1912 text book, *Essentials in journalism*, where he writes that, 'A *feature story* is one in which the news element is made subordinate' (2010: 136).

In his 1925 book, *Chats on feature writing by members of the Blue Pencil Club of professional writers*, Harrington expands on his initial definition, explaining that:

the feature story deals with people handled intimately. Items not sufficiently important to appear in news may often be salvaged for good feature articles. The newspaper makes room for such non-news material because it strikes a human note and escapes the limitations of time and space (1925: 138–39).

Additionally, Harrington notes that feature writers take pride in their narrative craft, adding, somewhat ambivalently, 'the feature story often lends itself to the tricks and insincerities of the literary fakir' (1925: 139).

Seeing features as secondary to the news by making use of news' off-cuts, has set the stage for the modern sensibility regarding the lower status of the feature, despite Harrington's personal efforts to support its exponents. And it's perhaps for this reason that journalism studies has tended to focus on the craft of features and the freelance techniques required to get stories published at the expense of more analytical work on the history of features, their rhetorical strategies or socio-political meaning (Johnstone & Ciofalo 1994). Part of the legacy may therefore be institutional, since the feature writer's role has mostly been seen in contrast to that of news reporters, who are more usually embedded as staff writers in news organisations, although they might sometimes write features as part of their job. In Harrington's books, the implied division of staff writers, who are trained as reporters and write news, from feature writers, who might have a literary or journalism background and write as freelancers, is already in evidence. His advice includes, 'to be a good business man or woman' (1935: 12) and, if paid, not to feel that he 'has debased his talents or ... joined the ranks of the money-grubbers and the literary hacks' (1935: 2). It was assumed that a

news journalist represented a profession employed by newspapers, whereas a feature writer belonged to a dilettantish class of small businessmen and women who enjoyed writing.

The Blue Pencil Club, referred to in Harrington's title, resembled what might now be called a writing group. Formed in New York in 1913, it was named for the editors of the *Columbia daily spectator* at the point of their handing over the publication to the School of Journalism at Columbia University, which opened that year; and its aims were 'to find and encourage literary talent by friendly criticism' (Smithpedia 2013). As Steensen notes, it is perhaps due to the editorial base of the Blue Pencil Club that attention to prose style was mentioned as an element of features, and that the feature was seen as a genre for 'writers' rather than 'journalists'.¹ As Steensen points out in his overview of feature textbooks:

The same labeling of feature writers as *writers* instead of journalists and the link to fiction-writing runs through all significant textbooks on feature journalism (see for instance Blundell 1988; Garrison 2004; Reddick 1949; Williamson 1977). Garrison argues for instance that '[m]any writers will say that feature articles fall somewhere between news writing and short story writing' (2010: 137).

This distinction between news *journalists* and feature *writers* helps to explain the paucity of critical as opposed to craft-based scholarship on the form. To add another layer of marginalization, features are not quite literary journalism, either, since while most features conform to the generic attributes of this form – as factual story telling using narrative techniques – they tend to be shorter, and are more often linked to the news cycle than longer form literary journalism or creative nonfiction, which might be book-length and take years to complete. That the home of features is magazines and these too have been overlooked as a subject for scholarly attention compound the effect (Holmes & Nice 2012: 1–2). As Steensen writes:

Feature journalism is generally associated with newspaper weekend sections and glossy magazines. Human-interest stories, reportage, celebrity profiles, colourful background stories, lifestyle stories, personal columns – these are among the kinds of stories we label 'feature journalism', or 'soft news' (2010: 137).

As the reference to 'soft news' suggests, many journalism scholars see features as a lowering of news standards, hence features have been dismissed as 'newzak' (Franklin 1997), 'dumbing down' (Temple 2008: 173), 'infotainment' (Allan 2004: 202) or a 'low-fact product' (Randall 2000: 194). Despite this, features have continued to proliferate and account for more rather than less space in journalism publications, growing from 10 per cent of content in the 1750s to up to 70 per cent in the early 20th century (Niblock 2008: 46). With the growth in newspaper magazine supplements in the past two decades, in order to maximize advertising as newspapers lost circulation, features have become even more popular (Steensen 2010: 131).

Hartsock's essay 'It was a dark and stormy night' traces the increase in the use of narrative journalism in news contexts through the 20th century, as he suggests that 'editors sense the limitations implicit to the objectivist paradigm' (2007: 257; see also Kramer 2000). He argues that in the past two decades in particular, there has been a significant increase in narrative news articles, of longer length or sometimes

serialized, being awarded the Pulitzer and other prizes, and becoming institutionalized through the work of the Harvard Niemen Foundation, among other causes:

A more traditional storytelling model then – with character development, complication, descriptive color, plot, and resolution – is returning to the front page after being largely marginalized for nearly a century, its increasing publication reflecting a shift in critical perception in the newspaper establishment as to what constitutes journalism. While it would be overstating the case to suggest that the publication of a narrative-literary journalism in newspapers has become ubiquitous, the shift nonetheless reveals a change in how newspaper editors and reporters who publish such narratives view readers – no longer as passively receiving what is provided to them, but as actively engaged in creating their own meaning (2007: 258).

Hartsock also distinguishes between the feature and literary journalism but decides ultimately that the two forms are different in degree rather than kind. He argues that while the pyramid structured news report relies on exposition, the feature needs far less of this, but still more than narrative literary journalism. He writes that:

the inverted pyramid model of journalism is expository in nature because it summarizes the conclusion to what is newsworthy in what is called the ‘summary lead,’ and then provides the information of the story in descending order of importance as determined by journalistic convention ... the contrast with traditional narrative models could hardly be more striking (2007: 262).

The difference between the feature and the news story is ‘more complex ... in that features can be viewed as a form of narrative’ but this is in many cases subordinate to the primary discursive point they serve to illustrate (2007: 262–63). Given the overlap, he concludes that ‘such works are perhaps better examined according to the emphasis or degree of their modalities’ (2007: 264).

Harrington’s early definition remains useful in that a feature may subordinate its news content, and by virtue of this, acquire timelessness; and it’s a form of journalism that invites intimacy with the reader through its focus on human-interest subjects, a personal prose style, a subjective perspective and the emotional pull of narrative. But these elements of intimacy and timelessness – free from ‘limitations of time and space’ – have presented themselves as a double-edged sword to the status of features: on the one hand, they are more prestigious than mere reporting; on the other, they are inferior as news.

Not drowning, waving: features online

While features might seem amenable to the multimedia, interactive capabilities of the internet, many media commentators and scholars at first doubted their ability to thrive outside print due to the expectation that attention spans for reading onscreen would be shorter than for the page (Dillon 1992; Noyes & Garland 2008). This was particularly the case prior to the development of better quality screens, which made for easier reading, but is still subject to debate, particularly for text-centred story telling (Jabr 2013). Although news items in print mostly occlude the aesthetic in order to reinforce the objective authority of their content, their generic characteristics of brevity,

topicality and speed have proved ideal for the internet, where a one-line report may now constitute a news item (Thurman 2005); and Twitter and Facebook are common sources of news (Holcomb *et al* 2013). Additionally, news sites' capacity for updating facts, while interacting with readers who comment on, correct or add to a story, has delivered larger, participatory audiences, as newspaper circulation has declined (Knott 2013).

Although print magazine publications have fared better than newspapers with the circulation of key titles rising in 2012 (Starkman 2013), they have also been under economic pressures to boost subscriptions as advertisers have moved online. Furthermore, the web has been regarded as a 'cognitive medium' rather than an affective one (Thurman 2005: 239). According to one comparative study, simply told factual material was shown to be best suited to the screen, as it was found that, 'text written in an "objective" style was 27 per cent better than "marketese" in terms of speed and accuracy of reading, recall and reader satisfaction' (Thurman 2005: 238).²

Holmes writes that a feature is 'a form which asks the reader to make more of a commitment' than a report; and the print magazine perfected the art of making 'every feature as inviting as possible' (2005: 251). Taylor also notes that 'reading ... features tends to be a leisure activity' (2005: 124) or as Meuret writes, invites a 'different temporality' (2013: 3). A recent study of features in major US newspapers and their news sites bears out these impressions, showing a fall in the number of features and their word length in print across the past decade. According to a report by Dean Starkman, there was a decline of 86 per cent between 2003 and 2013 in the publication of news stories exceeding 2,000 words in *The Los Angeles times*. Similarly dramatic falls of 50 per cent and 35 per cent were reported for longform journalism in the *Washington post* and *The Wall Street journal* respectively (Starkman 2013: 1). In contrast to Hartsock's findings in 2007, these figures reinforce predictions that increasing competition in the attention economy has continued to apply a downward pressure on article word length, and by extension, the publication of features in newspapers and magazines. They also align with the drop in newspaper advertising revenue in the past decade, resulting in fewer journalists with less time to research in-depth stories. As Starkman (2013) observes, the number of published stories (of all kinds) has decreased at all the major newspapers in this period with the exception of Murdoch's *The Wall Street journal*.

Yet this is no simple narrative that equates time pressures, reduced revenue and onscreen reading with brevity. The same study, for example, reveals that while *The New York times* published 25 per cent fewer stories over 2,000 words, it also published '32% more stories over 3,000 words' (Starkman 2013: 2). Similarly, the reduction in story length need not necessarily be equated with a loss of commitment to narrative journalism, according to the *New York times* Managing Editor, Marc Dovoisin. 'Narrative,' he writes, 'is not a function of length and never has been. It's a way of telling a story, an approach built on direct observation, carefully rendered scenes and the patient accretion of detail' (Starkman 2013: 2).

While this comment might seem to justify brevity, an overview of the history of internet news and magazine sites, reveals that features, including long features, have

continued to be published online, and have not been drowned out by news. Not only have features lent themselves to multimedia narratives, enabling new and hybrid genres to emerge, they have also benefitted from the limitless space of the internet and freedom from the costs of printing, paper and transport. As Sherman Young notes:

If anything, the screen has invigorated the longform text. Freed from the financial constraints of a paper-based industry (which had been reduced to pandering to the shortening attention spans of some) longer pieces are more readily available. Academic journals, in all their wordy glory, are largely electronic. And the net is crowded with aggregators like *Longreads* and publications like *McSweeney's*, dedicated to longer word counts (2011).

Jonathan Glick is also optimistic that features will continue to succeed online. He predicts that ‘long-form writing will survive and will do so by abandoning news nuggets’. He explains that the value of features:

will hinge on the author’s subjective perspective, experience, or knowledge. They may be longer ... uniquely styled, visually interesting, or delivered via video or audio. These pieces will be written to be saved to read later — for that time when the reader takes a moment to relax, learn, and enjoy resting by the side of the stream (Glick 2011: 1).

With the increasing interest in slow culture extending to sites of ‘slow journalism’, such as *Longplay* and *Atavist*, magazine features are ideally suited to readers seeking respite from the ‘Twitterized hyper-torrent of information splidgets’ (McKenzie 2013: 1). And if readers are interrupted in their idyll – due to commuting while reading, or clicking on a link to another site, or replying to an email while reading their digital edition of *The New Yorker* in bed – then it’s good to be reminded that intermittency has always been a feature of reading. As Goggin and Hamilton argue, ‘By the eighteenth century ... the discontinuous reading habits fostered by the codex were no longer new’ (2012: 106).

It’s a myth that there’s a gold standard of hours-long leisurely (or studious) reading. Like many cultural norms, the popular 19th century image of a young woman whiling away the afternoon in a window-seat with a three-volume novel is not based on its representativeness, so much as its idealisation of middle-class accomplishment and ease. Quoting Stallybrass’ work, in *Books and readers in Early Modern England* (2002), Goggin and Hamilton point out that, ‘Despite serving today as a cultural touchstone for the value of the printed book, the novel is actually “a brilliantly perverse interlude in the long history of discontinuous reading”’ (2012: 107).

Accordingly, instead of seeing onscreen reading as a challenge to on-page reading, it can be shown to offer an ideal combination of modes of presentation for reading to thrive, engaging a range of cognitive processes, such as listening, viewing and interaction, as magazine websites evolve. As Goggin and Hamilton suggest in relation to the transition of fiction to mobile media: ‘Novels on phones do not replace conventional print versions but rather complement them and offer readers an increased opportunity to engage with the text’ (2012: 107). Just as the success of the Kindle and other e-readers indicates a reader’s attention to writing can survive a

change of platform, so too does the screen appear to be accommodating the imperatives of features. A recent Pew survey shows that younger readers are as inclined to read words onscreen as their older counterparts have been on the page (Thompson 2012b).

Websites for features

Since the 1990s four categories of websites that showcase feature writing appear to have emerged. This typology is provisional and may well accrue more categories as the delivery of feature journalism online develops.

Magazine sites with print corollaries that include features

The first category contains websites that provide a complementary online experience for readers of their hard copy titles. Most of these are the commercial magazines that were quick to see opportunities to build readership communities around their online publications and expand their advertising base but viewed these as parallel to their print publication, which continued to provide more substantial copy and the tactile and reading pleasures of print. While some material posted online was different, such as interactive comment threads, staff writer blogs and slide show photo essays, other feature material was either not available in digital form or remained behind a pay-wall, in order to maintain the distinction between the two forms.

Following the introduction of e-readers, tablets and apps for mobile reading, digital editions began to be marketed separately; and some of the paper-based magazines became purely online – for example, for a time *Newsweek* dropped its print edition altogether, though they have recently reversed their decision.

The success of some websites has enhanced or exceeded its print publication to the point where an online business model has become more viable than its print version or brought new financial robustness to the company. *The Atlantic monthly* is perhaps the most striking example of this. As the longest continually running monthly magazine in America, it has increased its circulation and advertising revenue significantly through the development of its website, posting a profit in 2010 for the first time in a decade, while much of its content remains free to readers (Peters 2010).

Other commercial magazines have developed a different look and feel for their online content, taking advantage of multimedia to present lots of shorter or fragmentary articles. *Vogue*, for example, reserves most of its features for its print publication, with the exception of celebrity profiles, and focuses on the image-based consumer, fashion stories and lists, structured around slide shows and video. Another example is London's *Monocle*, which not only provides some of its hard copy content online for free but has set up a highly successful online broadcasting operation, including 'The stack' program which reviews the future of print media.

Magazine sites that exclusively showcase original features

The second category of website that showcases online feature writing contains websites set up as purely online entities. The majority see their existence as digital only and have no ambition to provide a print equivalent. However, as Mark Hooper of the *Guardian* points out, some online entities have expanded offline:

Some of the internet's big players – fashion sites such as style.com, asos.com and netaporter.com, online kids' game Moshi Monsters and yes, even Google itself – are now publishing print magazines, using traditional media to refresh the parts of their business model that other solutions can't reach (2012: 1).

This has been successful for magazines targeting children who enjoy the tactile qualities of print equivalents of gaming sites, and can cut and paste their favourite images and stories the old-fashioned way.

A website which co-produced an off-line equivalent that became more successful, is the Berlin magazine *032c*, which now produces a glossy print version and has relegated its site to archiving its content. Its editor Joerg Koch explains:

Quite absurdly, when we launched *032c* as a biannual limited edition newspaper ... it was supposed to be the advertisement for our website ... However ... the print magazine is so much more efficient in terms of budget and recognition than doing a streaming media website ... So the magazine got a life of its own and grew into a big glossy mag celebrating print's qualities (Hooper 2012).

Examples of early sites thriving exclusively online include *Salon.com* (established 1995) and *Slate.com* (established 1996), both continuously publishing high quality feature articles as a central role and remaining commercial and critical successes. In 2009 *Slate* provided four to six week 'sabbaticals' for its writers to focus on a longform piece of intensely researched journalism. Editor David Plotz stated, 'For *Slate* to be a great magazine ... it's not simply enough ... to be responsive to the news moment' (Koblin 2009).

Nerve.com is another pioneering website for feature writing, established in 1997 as a sex magazine. In recent years the site added a dating facility, but it continues producing quality feature writing, in addition to fiction, and has published several books including anthologies showcasing its content, for example, *Nerve: literate smut*, 1998.

Two recently established magazine websites publishing originally commissioned features online are *Aeon* magazine and *Narratively*. Both of these use the updateability of the net to frequently add content; however, they retain a commitment to showcasing quality writing and distinguishing themselves from faster paced news writing. Launched in London in September 2012, *Aeon* publishes a new long-form essay each weekday, provided free, and divides its features into broad categories such as 'Being human', 'Altered states' and 'World views' (*aeon.com* 2013). *Narratively* publishes to a new theme each week, and aims to 'slow down the news cycle':

We avoid the breaking news and the next big headline, instead focusing exclusively on untold, human-interest stories – the rich, intricate narratives that get at the heart of

what a place and its people are all about ... Every story gets the space and time it needs to have an impact – an approach we call ‘slow storytelling’ or ‘slow journalism’ (*Narrative.ly* 2013).

While media commentator McKenzie sees *Aeon* as an ‘anti-aggregator’, or the ‘magazine that isn’t’, most of these sites, like the aggregator sites, link to other sites and share links. By not expecting their readers to stay put for long on one site, they not only share material in an open source culture, they also encourage reading offline. As McKenzie points out, *Aeon* ‘encourages readers to save its stories for reading later via the likes of Instapaper, Kindle or Pocket’ (*Pandodaily.com* 2013).

Other successful sites with a mix of free and subscriber content have crossed over into the category of the literary magazine, including fiction, artwork and poetry, such as *Kill your darlings*, the *Lifted brow* and *McSweeney’s*. On the news features side, the not-for-profit sites *Propublica* and *Global mail* specialize in investigative journalism and have both produced award winning features since their creation in 2008 and 2012 respectively. Both publish longform features and as *Global mail* explains, it elects not to ‘swim in the 24/7 news cycle’ (*Global Mail.org* 2013).

Aggregator sites

An early development in websites for longform reading have been the aggregator sites, which take a curatorial role in selecting the best features from other publications. One of the first, *Arts and letters daily*, was set up by the *Chronicle of higher education* in 1998. Initially based on an email list established in 1994, the site is designed for a readership similar to the *New York review of books* and the *New republic*’s and receives on average 2.5 million visitors per month.

Other aggregator sites, some free and others by subscription, include the *Guardian*’s *Long good read*, which in November established an experimental newspaper version; *Eurozine*; *byliner*; *longreads*; *medium*; and *matter*. Sites such as *Huffington post* and *Atlantic.com* also act as aggregators via the profusion of links to other features they routinely provide.

Disaggregator sites

More recently an opposing trend has emerged, yet one which logically follows from aggregation, since it also enables lifting a story from its original site and compiling it with a selection elsewhere – except in this case that ‘elsewhere’ is the reader’s device. It follows that with this uncoupling of features from their publication, the feature might now become a stand-alone entity.³ As Glick explains, ‘social and mobile platforms make payment easier, so it will be practical to charge a small fee’ (2011: 2–3) for individual stories. This has begun with the establishment of *LongPlay*, a Finnish website established in January 2013 by a ‘democratic collective’ of eight journalists, two designers and a photographer working as volunteers. Focusing on the expensive, hence increasingly overlooked area of investigative journalism, *LP*, as they

prefer to be called, publishes one story a month online, and sells this as a ‘digital single’ or e-single.

Editor Johanna Vehkoo credits *LP* with significantly increasing sales of e-books in Finland, a market which has been slow to take up online journalism due to its small, protected print market. Their second feature was a scoop resulting in an ongoing investigation into members of parliament. *LP* won a media innovation award in November 2013 providing funds for the site to continue (Heiskanen 2013).

Another example of a disaggregator is *Atavist*, which sells original features and ‘collaborations’ as ‘e-singles’ priced at either \$2.99 or \$3.99. These are promoted as ‘access to the story right now in our Web reader and our iPhone and iPad apps, all of which include a full audiobook, additional sound, video, maps, timelines, and more’. *Atavist*’s stated aim is to push ‘the boundaries of multimedia publishing while always emphasizing the story above all’. It describes itself as a ‘pioneering longform publication’ dedicated to the ‘art of storytelling’ (Atavist 2013).

The feature as multimedia

There are many striking examples of feature articles that have utilized slide shows, audio and video interviews, still photography and video clips, as well as creative artwork that scrolls and fades behind written text. The best known is perhaps ‘Snow fall’, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2013 for its coverage of an avalanche in Canada resulting in the deaths of several professional skiers. The fully online *Guardian Australia* also won the 2013 Walkley for multimedia journalism with ‘Firestorm’, its account of the fires in Tasmania earlier that year. These features used a similar mix of blocks of text in chapter form, with images both behind and alongside the text and links to audio and video interviews to supplement the storyline. Beautifully crafted, such stories are expensive, with 16 credited to ‘Snow fall’ plus the reporter and a six-month schedule. ‘Firestorm’ involved 23 staff and took three months to complete.

A lesser known and much earlier example is Mark Bowden’s ‘Black Hawk down’ published online in serial form (with a new episode each day for one month) on the *Philadelphia inquirer*’s site in 1997. An unexpected runaway success, the story of the famous Somali battle that cost 18 American lives and killed or injured 1,000 Somalis attracted 20,000 more subscribers to its print edition in the month it unfolded, and at its height received 46,000 visitors to the story each day. Making use of six staff in addition to the reporter, ‘Black Hawk down’ includes links to audio, video and interactive graphics to explain battles and strategies; and Bowden could update and correct information as feedback poured in from readers, including military personnel who had fought there. Although this feature is more simply designed, with text interspersed with links and icons to audio-visual material, it paved the way for the layering of narratives that has appeared more recently, including the use of what is now known as data journalism or interactive news.

Not only did multimedia make the story more entertaining and provide layers of information, Bowden believes the narrative pace was maintained more effectively by using links. He writes:

the story became part illustrated book, part documentary film, part radio program. It was all these things and more, because it allowed readers (who at times became viewers) to explore the story and its source material in any way they chose (2000: 2).

With the mix of media in these longform features, it is arguable that the use of multimedia necessitates the rebadging of this journalism as documentary, or as Thompson terms it, 'textual documentary' (*Atlantic.com* 2012). However, since written text remains central to the story, these are perhaps better understood as instances of 'aesthetic journalism', a term coined by Alfredo Cramerotti, who argues that the mix of multimedia and writing points to a collaboration of art forms in which the political and aesthetic can be balanced: He writes:

Albert Einstein reportedly stated that we cannot solve our problems at the same level of thinking that has generated them. With art and journalism, if we open up and re-think our conception of traditional information formats, allowing imagination and open-endedness, we might perceive things in ways we remain unaware of. In this sense, while journalism reports, and fiction reveals, aesthetic journalism does both (2009: 103).

While news can be produced as events unfold, it is not intended to provide 'a coherent understanding' as the *Economist's* Babbage blog points out. Hence 'explainers', 'story streams' and 'topic pages' have become popular as a way to make sense of long-running or complex situations. But longer news forms are not only open ended, they tend to resemble a list of repetitive items – and there are lots of them to wade through (2011). For a magazine with more lead-time, and longer, more considered articles, 'the elegant complete package is the whole point of the exercise' (2011). This package comprises a narrative arc, the interweaving of facts, anecdotes and quotes into scenes, information, points of view and dialogue. It presents a meaningful interplay of words and images, of diction, metaphor and tone. It offers the perspective of the narrator who brings expertise, knowledge and an honest disclosure of their limits. These are just some of the elements that provide confidence that a given story is worth reading. And these are just some of the elements that create a satisfactory sense of a whole. Readers are aware that no single feature can provide the full story, but can enjoy being guided to what's most important and how those parts add up to a satisfying and comprehensible version of the truth. As Cramerotti writes: 'By this time, we know that the interaction of aesthetics and information is the foundation upon which we construct our thoughts and opinions, and shape our idea of society' (2009: 103).

(Not) the end

Perhaps the feature is too fluid a form of journalism, as Taylor has suggested, for critics reasonably to expect, or benefit from, a fixed definition. Perhaps storytelling is compelling enough in itself, whatever structural dimensions it might adopt, varieties of media it might incorporate, worlds it might represent, or platforms it chooses to inhabit.

In his *History of American literary journalism*, Hartsock points out that the ‘boundaries between the feature stories and narrative literary journalism are indeed extremely fine’ (2000: 127). So too is there a shared imperative between the novel and its factual narrative cousin to bring something new and fresh to our understanding of the real. Both, after all, are linked etymologically through the Latin root, *novus* or *novella*, for the Old English, *neowe*, or new, and ‘it is no accident that early examples of English newspapers were in fact called novels’ (2000: 50).

Above all, though, narrative facticity is an ‘attempt to narrow the gulf between subjectivity and the object’, amounting to a ‘version of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the novel of the “inconclusive present”’ (Hartsock 2000: 247), the description of which must lie close to the heart of all journalism. As such, fluidity and indeterminacy seem only fitting. And so the feature can perpetually reinvent itself.

But neither is constant innovation necessarily a requirement. As Jonathan Green suggests, the future of the feature might simply be a case of the power of the written word:

The strength of online media may lie in its native capacity to flit between various modes of presentation; from video to audio, via three dimensional contextual hyperlinking ... but one of the little oddities of journalism online is how much of it is straight forward text on a page. So old-fashioned, but there you have it: the internet loves a written story ...

Reading. Depth. Analysis. Insight. All of it in the supposedly hit-and-giggle-space of online media (2010: 46).

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Endnotes

1. The NSW Society of Editors is today still linked to this tradition, naming its newsletter the *Blue Pencil*; and most of its members are book editors.
2. Whether marketese includes narrative is unclear.
3. In book publishing a reverse trend is occurring with shortform monographs becoming more popular, such as Palgrave Pivot, implying a relaxation of formal constraints as e-publishing expands.

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